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ABSTRACT

A brief summary of social studies research from 1976 to 1983 is divided into five parts. "Cognitive Thinking and Cognitive Process Research" presents a definition of critical thinking, recommendations for cognitive process instruction, and results of cognitive process research concerning the relationship between learning style and developmental level. "Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies Research" discusses recent research indicating the connection between the development of the young child's sense of self, school performance, and social relationships. Also discussed is research in the areas of spatial development, general concept formation skill development, and information processing skill development. "Research in the Socio-Moral Domain" considers research on values clarification, community involvement and social action approaches to social studies education, and cooperative learning. "Ethnographic Research" focuses on the effects of significant changes in curriculum, instructional practices, and personnel. The role of ethnographic research in sensitizing social educators to the complex interactive nature of instruction is also discussed. "Research on the Foundations of Social Education" outlines debates regarding the purpose of social education, particularly those debates arising over the "Three Traditions" approach. A list of references concludes the paper. (LP)



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# SOCIAL STUDIES RESEARCH: THEORY INTO PRACTICE

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# SOCIAL STUDIES RESEARCH: THEORY INTO PRACTICE

by William B. Stanley

This brief summary of social studies research from 1976 to 1983 is taken from a more extensive review (Stanley 1985a). It is divided into five parts: (1) cognition and critical thinking; (2) early childhood/elementary; (3) socio-moral; (4) ethnographic; and (5) foundations of social education.

**Critical Thinking and Cognitive Process Research**

Cognitive process research is on the rise, and critical thinking is the cognitive process of primary concern for social educators. Unfortunately, research in this area has been clouded by faulty assumptions and lack of clear definition of critical thought (Cornbleth 1985). Furthermore, despite renewed attention, there is little evidence that critical thinking is emphasized in most social studies classrooms.

Critical thinking is not merely a discrete set of cognitive skills. It involves informed skepticism and a dynamic process of questioning and reasoning about personal and social concepts and issues. This ability is shaped by one's history and culture. It can be used to generate and analyze knowledge and, ideally, is a self-reflective process. Thus it involves both cognitive and affective dimensions. Such a complex process would be difficult to teach directly. But social educators can provide a classroom environment and strategies to stimulate and support critical thought (Cornbleth 1985).

Cognitive process instruction should not isolate skills from each other or from the knowledge to which they will be applied. Conversely, teaching lists of social studies content does not contribute to critical thinking. Instead, students should attempt to map the relationships among concepts and data. Developing the abilities to recognize specific types of problems, raise questions relevant to each, and examine the ways to evaluate arguments and knowledge claims are parts of critical thinking that should be stressed.

Research on schema theory reveals how our schemata influence how knowledge is interpreted and what new forms of knowledge are acquired. Social educators should present students with information and situations which challenge their existing schemata. This could help students to modify existing orientations or construct new ones to help them recognize problems and apply appropriate skills, questions, and knowledge to them (Cornbleth 1985).

Cognitive process research also indicates that learning outcomes in this area seem more related to one's personal history, knowledge, and information processing capacity than to learning style or developmental level. Both learning style and developmental level seem more related to content than to inherent characteristics of individuals (Cornbleth 1985). Therefore, teachers should stress developing task-relevant knowledge.

Finally, we should not overestimate the value of experience in education. Simplistic approaches to learning by doing do not work well and might even interfere with learning. We need to focus on the quality of experience and prepare students to use experience in educational ways (Cornbleth 1985).

**Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies Research**

A large body of associational research links the development of the young child's sense of self to school performance and social relationships. Self-concept is distinct from but correlated with academic self-concept. But it is not clear which of the variables described above most affects the others, and it seems the effect could be in both directions. For instance, academic ability does not always correlate with other measures of self-concept. Yet there is evidence that final grades and certain higher-level thinking processes and self-concept are positively correlated (Jantz and Klawitter 1985).

In the area of spatial development, research indicates that even preschool children are ready for instruction when they start to codify and systematize perceptions of their environment. They often possess spatial skills and the ability to abstract information from map symbols. One study revealed that first-graders' strategies for processing spatial information were not significantly different from those of fifth-graders. But the first-graders did not do as well as adults, and the developmental aspects of this learning remain unclear (Jantz and Klawitter 1985). Eight-to eleven-year-olds can picture reality on a map. Nine- to twelve-year-olds can conceptualize the relationships among objects mapped, interpret information based on them, use them in data collection, and relate them to real life situations and textual context.

General concept formation skills are evident by two or three years of age. An expository instructional strategy developed by Tennyson seems to be effective for concept learning, even with first-graders (McKinney, Larkins, Ford, and Davis 1983). Even so, four- to eight-year-olds have great difficulty withpolitical constructs like city, state, and nation.

Young children's information processing skills are generally more developed than their verbal skills. Imaginal mediation appears to be one effective alternative to verbal strategies. Students asked to generate internal representations of various forms of knowledge seem to learn better. They can also apply this strategy to later verbal learning. When combined with programmed pictorial instruction, imaginal representations seem to be another effective strategy for concept learning. Evidence suggests that using mental images also facilitates recall, semantic organization, and text comprehension. (Jantz and Klawitter 1985).

**Research in the Socio-Moral Domain**

Some of the socio-moral research is excellent, but a great deal is very poor. In some instances there is little or no research support for proposed approaches to socio-moral education.

The values clarification approach has received considerable attention, but research indicates that it has little or no effect in terms of its stated goals. The cognitive moral reasoning approach developed by Kohlberg appears to be more effective. It is supported by better theory than values clarification, and the research studies tend to be better designed and more consistent. Still, the known effects of this approach are limited and narrow. There is no evidence of a wider impact in areas like political attitudes, social behavior, and school performance. There is almost no evidence regarding the effect of value analysis, another major approach.

There are limited but positive results from early research on community involvement/social action approaches to socio-moral education. It remains unclear as to what, if any, long-term effects such programs have.

More promising results have been seen in research on cooperative learning. The positive effects on student attitudes and behavior should encourage further study. There have also been positive research results in studies where controversial

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issues were emphasized and an open classroom atmosphere provided.

Research on directive moral education is virtually nonexistent. We need to inquire into how teacher advocacy and modeling affect students in the socio-moral domain.

### Ethnographic Research

White (1985) argues that educational anthropology offers a significantly different research orientation, which is concerned with understanding the meaning actors (e.g., students and teachers) give to their own situations. This research framework views culture (and subcultures) as a self-contained field to be studied holistically in terms of itself.

There have been a number of ethnographic studies examining the effect of significant changes in curriculum, instructional practices, personnel, or combinations of these. At first there appears to be a dramatic change; but careful investigation reveals little or no substantive change. In most cases traditional goals and values continue to be transmitted to students, regardless of the nature of the reforms or their intent. White (1985) concludes that faculty hold beliefs, generally unarticulated, which almost unconsciously shape instruction. Teachers persist in emphasizing "useful" social knowledge rooted in common sense—conventional wisdom with emphasis on facts and patriotic feeling.

Ethnographic research also helps describe some of the complex causes of student failure. First, students must actually learn how to "do" school. Some arrive with better skills for gaining and holding the teacher's attention. In several studies white middle-class students were found to be better at this than minority students, and it gave them both an initial and continuing advantage.

Cultural discontinuities and conflict can also account for student failure. If lessons are not designed to accommodate students with significantly different subcultures, they are unlikely to succeed. Actually, most of the dominant school values rejected by subcultures seem trivial and unnecessary for learning. But teachers should note that there are also situations where it does not seem possible to reconcile the subculture with the school.

Ethnographic research can sensitize social educators to the complex interactive nature of instruction. The type of teacher authority and methods seem less important than the match of expectations about what will happen between teachers and students. Teachers must be aware of the kinds of messages they send students, including their body language and tone of voice. All of this can influence student participation and performance (White 1985).

### Research on the Foundations of Social Education

Social education remains an area of numerous competing (and often conflicting) rationales. The debates regarding the purpose of social education have persisted throughout this century (Hertzberg 1981). This is a source of concern. Many social educators maintain that prevailing rationales can have a strong influence on the selection of content and instructional practices (Stanley 1985b).

Some of the most recent controversy involves reactions to Barr, Barth, and Shermis (1977), who have posited Three Traditions or basic rationales for social education. These Traditions—Cultural Transmission, Social Science, and Reflective Inquiry—are said to be distinct and to necessitate different content selection, instructional methods, and ends.

Critics hold that (1) the Three Traditions are not actually distinct rationales; (2) none is a sufficient rationale for social education; (3) in practice, very few teachers follow any of the traditions but tend to be eclectic and mix two or three; and (4) a number of other rationales exist which do not fit the Three Traditions model. Given such significant criticism, the Three Traditions appears to be a somewhat simplistic and misleading model of social education.

Other researchers note that the conflict over rationales is of almost no concern to teachers (Morrissett and Haas 1982). Most teachers seem to have reached a *de facto* consensus on the purpose of social education as the overt and covert indoctrination of our society's norms and values.

In the past decade a new body of revisionist research and criticism has emerged in the field. Mainstream social educators have focused on the various failures and weaknesses of our educational programs and the need for curriculum reform. Conversely, the revisionist critics argue that our schools work all too well to accomplish the reproduction of the existing society and culture. These critics have attempted to provide new analytic tools and theoretical insights to help us understand how schools function in relation to the wider society. Their analysis holds that schools cannot be neutral. They always act in accordance with an ideology and tend to represent the interests of dominant groups. The revisionists have proposed the new rationale for social education, involving a fundamental or radical rejection of a number of traditional values and institutions. They also reject the alleged incompatibility of indoctrination and reflective inquiry. The central goal is an educational system grounded in the values of social justice and emancipation (Giroux 1983).

In sum, the field of social education remains divided over means and ends. The disputes reflect an intellectual vitality. But they also reflect confusion and impede reform efforts. Both mainstream and revisionist educators agree that rationales do influence practice. Thus research should continue to help identify the need for change and structural impediments to it.

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